

Interview with Mike Rohaly of NACMHA

Interviewer: Jaimie Lynn Turner

Jaimie: Could you tell me what your personal connection is with the coal community.

Mike: Sure. I have been a lifetime employee of the coal mining company. Went to school for mining engineering and began work with the coal company even when I was going to school. It was called a co-op program, a work study program. I would go to school for 6 months and work in the mine for 6 months. That way I was able to pay my way through college. I continued working with that company for my whole career, which lasted 37 years and I just retired, in 2008, from the coal company. So I have been associated with the coal mining pretty much my whole working life.

Jaimie: Are there any personal stories that you would like to share from your experiences in the mines?

Mike: Oh, there's a lot of them really. Yeah, I mean the mines are... it's an interesting work, I mean to me. You know, there's always of course danger, that's kind of inherent and kind of like the, maybe the bad part of the history of coal mining. You know the danger involved and things, but it's always something different to do in the mine. You know it's quite a variety of environments. You know you could be working in a warm hot place one day. You could be working in below freezing temperatures the next day, a lot of wind and things, water and you know. Just the conditions vary greatly just even inside the same coal mine. So it's, to me it's kind of part of the attraction to coal mining because it's interesting and kind of an adventure for a young person, you know. In fact, puts me in the mind of a Johnny Cash song. You know Johnny Cash?

Jaimie: Oh yeah.

Mike: Of course. How's that go now? He sings a song called "Dark as a Dungeon". Something about coal mining will seep into your soul and that kind of thing. Which there's a lot of truth to that, I think. I think people who start working in the mines begin to enjoy it because the natural attraction to the different environment and even like the brotherhood with coworkers and things. I use that term brotherhood; but there are women of course who work in the mines. Of course that was not until later in the 20th century really that women became more accepted in mining. Kind of like women in the Navy, it just was not done. But the brotherhood aspect of coal mining is a strong one also. I think it's, you know, similar in many ways I think to the military, you know, and even the organizational hierarchy is similar, you know. I mean you don't have like sergeants and generals and things in the mines, but you have mine superintendents and mine foreman and section foreman, and you know those kinds of things. So that's a strong aspect, you know, in my mind, of coal mining too. The brotherhood aspect or like you know coworkers kind of look out for each other, which it's only natural but even more necessary in that environment because you know there are a lot of hazards and things. Just helps to have more than one set of eyes looking at, you know. So that's just a pretty

strong aspect I've always thought. And honestly, I mean I myself am not a second generation or third generation coal miner. I'm a first generation coal miner.

Jaimie: Oh, so you didn't have any family in the mines?

Mike: Right. I'm originally from the Pittsburgh area and do have a lot of uncles and things that worked in steel mills and things like that, didn't have any coal miners in the family. I kind of got interested in coal mining through a high school physics teacher. A coal company, a couple of coal companies, came to the school and offered this co-op program, you know this work study program and it just sounded interesting and that's how I got involved in it. Of course the fact that I could pay for school, pay my own way through school, you know was an attraction too, because I come from a large family; a family of 7 kids. I'm the oldest of 7. So, it was kind of a nice way to pay for school. But, you know, ever since then it's kind of been in my blood. But I worked primarily in the Pittsburgh area for the early part of my career, which was the 70s and early 80s and then I transferred here to West Virginia in October 1982 and I've been living here ever since, working here, been in the same house all that time. It really just kind of struck me how little there was available to the general public to know and learn about, you know, about the coal mines and things like that, you know. Because I mean it became readily apparent just from being here a year, 2 years, that, you know, how much history there is in this particular area and state, but even this area specifically, Fairmont. It just kind of amazed me that, well for one thing there was not a coal mining museum, you know, anywhere to be found.

Jaimie: And the knowledge isn't passed down to the younger generations like it always, you know, it has been before. It's not something that is stressed in schools or a lot of places.

Mike: Yeah. You know. So, that is probably my biggest motivation to get the story out because I am not, you know, second, third, fourth generation coal miner and so I think I see things a little bit differently than the second, third, fourth generation coal miners. It's just, I think, so ingrained into most local coal miners that they just, I don't know, they like just take it for granted. And, I don't know, they just, they don't, I don't think they have a true appreciation for how great their work is, you know, to be honest. Like I said, the brotherhood aspect is there. They have a lot of respect for each other and that kind of thing, but they're not showy people, you know what I mean? They're not like in your face, I'm a coal miner, you know.

Jaimie: Yeah. They're a proud people, but they're humble at the same time.

Mike: Right, right. So nobody you know really seemed like wanted to take the initiative to get that word out there and tell the story of the region and the history and everything. Well that's not entirely true, cause I will say that in my 30 some years here that I did, I have seen, you know, initiatives for like coal mining museum and I've seen groups form and say hey we're going to, this time we're going to build a coal mining museum. I've seen 2 or 3 come and go and for one reason or another they disbanded and it wasn't really until the year like 2000 that I kind of felt like drawn into it. You know what I mean? I just had

seen too many initiatives go by the wayside and I just couldn't accept that, you know. It's not really in my nature to be a leader, okay? But I just felt drawn into the thing and felt like I needed to do something, you know, to, you know, tell the story of the area and of the coal miners in this area.

Jaimie: Is that brought your organization together?

Mike: Yes. And, you know, I am the kind of person that does not take commitment lightly, you know. So that was a big decision for me, you know, to kind of form the non-profit coal mining heritage group. I don't take that lightly. You know, once I do that I'm committed, you know, for life! So if it takes my life to tell the story, you know it's going to take my life to tell the story and it very well may take my life to tell the story, because we got started slow. You know, of course kind of formed the organization in the year 2000 and we got our non-profit status through the IRS in 2001. Of course you know September 11th 2001 happened and you know that certainly didn't put people's minds in the coal mining history. You know, everyone in the world of course was affected by that and so that, that kind of slowed our growth and things like that. And also the fact that, like I mentioned, there'd been other groups that had intended to start, build a coal mining museum and things and they came and went. And I think after jumping into the fray myself, I think that in retrospect probably a lot of the problem or hindrance in people going forward with that idea, it might sound ironic, but there's just so much history, there's just so much here in this area, in this immediate area, I mean that people who have interest in coal mining heritage have different ideas about where such a facility should be located, you know. Like, for example, Monongah, you know 5 or 6 miles south of here, you know, the largest coal mining disaster in U.S. history happened there, in 1907. It was a contingent and people think well that's where a museum should be you know. And another contingent said well we think it should be right in downtown Fairmont where the first commercial mine was started you know. And someone else will say well you know we still have some existing buildings from such and such time out in Carolina or whatever, we think it should be here. And another group say well there's actually still a mine here we could like reopen. So, I think that's counterproductive and made it difficult for people to get together on exactly where to build a coal mining museum and there's still some of that out there today. I think, I mean we've made this little humble little exhibit right here and there's really no historical significance to this particular location. There was a vein of coal on this property, which was mined you know probably 100 years ago, surfaced mined. It was very near the surface, up on the hill up here, but other than that there's really no history to this to this particular location. I personally felt that it was a good location because it is near the interstate, you know. You get traffic and maybe more visibility for travelers to see it and those kinds of things, but you know we're still kind of having that discussion... like do we want to like expand this facility or do we want to move it to another location like downtown for example. But it really wasn't until a few years ago that we kind of put the word out to local counties. Well let me say, just kind of frame our organization and our organization's geographic focus. Our geographic focus and historical focus is what we call the Fairmont field, okay? And the Fairmont field is 6 counties: Barbour, Harrison, Marion, Monongalia, Preston, and Taylor. So that's our, kind of our historic focus. So, after all these differing opinions were floating around out

there and different groups wanting to pursue a physical facility in different places and our organization itself is being counterproductive because of that. Just a few years ago, we kind of made an effort to, we had already established this small facility here, we made an effort to go out to those 6 counties and say we have the beginnings of a coal mining museum. We would like to give it to you. You place it where you would like to place it and we will support you. And we really didn't get any takers. And so it wasn't until that point in time that we kind of recommitted to this physical location right here. And I think that's largely why we've enjoyed some recent success, you know, because we recommitted to this location. We kind of had more of a game plan and were able to, you know, reach out to the community for help a little bit and we began to get some help. So we're really, the organization's really kind of polished for growth. And for your records it's called the Northern Appalachian Coal Mining Heritage Association, which is a mouth full. We go by the acronym, NACMHA. But we've really gained some momentum here in recent years because of that. We've enjoyed the support of Fairmont State, WVU, the county commission, United Mine Workers. One of the programs for WVU and Fairmont State is actually sponsored and funded by the Benedum Foundation, which is a huge, you know, philanthropic foundation. So that's really helped us and we've really even just in the past months have even gotten more support and more community interest from local townspeople who feel strongly about doing something really nice regarding a coal mining museum in downtown Fairmont. So we're kind of revisiting that discussion, you know about physical location and things.